

Tom Reifer, December 17, 2015

The dramatic archival revelations emanating from the recent release of highly classified US documents, notably the February 15, 1990 report of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB), "The Soviet "War Scare," at the very end of the 20th century, give a new urgency to efforts to respond to the increasing dangers of the nuclear age in the 21st. The revelations are explosive. Revealed in them, to a greater extent than ever before, is how a largely hidden, secret nuclear crisis in the early 1980s brought the world closer to nuclear war than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis. And yet, astonishingly, this nuclear crisis has been kept largely secret from the US and global public; even today, few global citizens are even aware of this reality, fueling complacency in a time of great danger and urgency.

The PFIAB report confirms the existence of a secret nuclear crisis in the early 1980s that brought the world ominously close to thermonuclear war. Such dramatic findings give a new urgency to the nuclear memoir, *Doomsday Machines*, yet also, necessitate additional time to process the new findings and reframe the memoir sufficiently to bring out their centrality, including rethinking previous understanding and analysis in light of these astonishing revelations. For these events presaged the return to the new Cold War today, akin to the pre-World War I world, with ominous risks of World War III. Today, the US and its NATO allies and Russian forces face off in the Ukraine and Europe - with some US officials calling for arming Ukrainian forces - and in the internationalized Syrian Civil War, now being bombed by four nuclear powers on opposite sides of the conflict, as well as by Turkey, a NATO member. This ongoing catastrophic conflict has already resulted in Turkey's shooting down of a Russian jet and the entry of Russian surface to air missiles in Syria capable of hitting sites in Turkey, in a potential escalating crisis that could turn nuclear. Meanwhile, NATO expansion and US/NATO and Russian military exercises in Europe and related provocative actions globally proceed apace, thus raising the possibility that the world is re-experiencing the Russian-American war scare of the early 1980s at this very moment.

In actually, in contrast to the 1990 PFIAB report, what the documents and subsequent analysis *actually* show, as former CIA analyst Benjamin Fischer (2006) argues, is that the late 1970s and early 1980s ushered in a *Soviet-American War Scare* that brought the world to the brink of thermonuclear catastrophe, the closest it had been since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Lurking behind this nuclear crisis is the continued US pursuit of strategic superiority throughout the Cold War, driven in the 1970s by the mythical "window of vulnerability," and the subsequent embrace

of continued force postures by the US and the Soviets that undermined strategic stability. The background of this was noted by President Carter in 1986:

I'm not sure our country has ever been willing, or ever will be willing, to accept genuine equality. What we define as equality almost inevitably is going to be superiority."ⁱ

Ironically, the Soviets came to fear an out of the blue nuclear Pearl Harbor attack on their forces of the kind that animated wizards of Armageddon at the RAND Corporation in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in the era of the bomber and missile gaps, most especially after the 1957 launch of Sputnik. This period in the late 1950s and early 1960s was also the time, it should be noted, of Soviet nuclear threats, which although bluffs given their relative lack of nuclear capability, drove US fears and the arms race to overcome perceived US vulnerabilities to a Soviet first-strike, as in the mid to late 1970s. In light of these dramatic findings on the real risks of a thermonuclear holocaust in the 1980s, it is urgent to reframe the analysis being developed in *The Doomsday Machines*, to underscore how this extraordinarily dangerous situation came to be pass, how the word miraculously survived it, why and how it seems to have been recreated in the present, and the possibilities for change to avert what Herbert York called *The Road to Oblivion*.

Today there world evidences both disturbing similarities and differences from the early 1980s. Although the nuclear threat remains an ominous reality, a major difference of the current period, which arguably makes the situation more dangerous, is the lack of a massive US, European and worldwide antinuclear movement as during the early 1980s. For in the 1980s, the coming into power of the Reagan administration played a major role in the emergence of the global antinuclear movement, virtually overnight, by articulating US strategies for prevailing in a nuclear war, heretofore secret, which brought to light many of the hidden dangers of the nuclear era into popular culture.

Unbeknown to most, much of the US planning for nuclear war traces back to the general guidance for thermonuclear nuclear written by Daniel Ellsberg in 1961 for the Kennedy administration. This poses a paradox: how did Daniel Ellsberg, whose life-long obsession has been to prevent nuclear war, especially the first-use of nuclear wars and a nuclear first-strike, come to write plans that provided much of the basis for US planning for a preemptive strike and strategic superiority during much of the Cold War, and which continues right up unto the present day, in ways that undermined strategic stability, part and parcel of the process of what Ellsberg called "the construction of instability"?ⁱⁱ

The PFIAB report reveals what Thomas Schelling called "The Reciprocal Fear of Surprise Attack," something central to both US and Russian thinking what

with the June 22, 1941 German attack on Russia in Operation Barbarossa, and the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on the US Fleet at Pearl Harbor. Such fears, which Pierrepont B. Noyes (1928) termed *The Pallid Giant*, in a book that was central to Paul Nitze's thinking about the arms race, continue to animate US and Russian force planning today, not to mention those of other nuclear powers such as India and Pakistan.

Central to the war scare of the 1980s was President Carter's Presidential Directive 59, which as Fred Kaplan (1983) reveals in *The Wizards of Armageddon*, traces back to the very guidance for thermonuclear war that Daniel Ellsberg wrote, and which became the basis for President Kennedy and Secretary of Defense McNamara's SIOP-62, and which indeed was handled by many of the same persons Ellsberg had collaborated with on nuclear war planning at the RAND Corporation.

The reality of the war scare reveals too, that strategic stability has historically been radically overestimated by virtually all analysts, even in the work of Daniel Ellsberg, despite Ellsberg having historically underscored the great risks of the nuclear age underappreciated by most other experts, and even antinuclear activists, with telling implications for the question of the nuclear danger in the age of renewed regional and global conflict today, what with continued NATO expansion and ongoing military conflict in Europe and the Middle East, including between Russia and members of the US-led NATO military alliance, such as Turkey. The world thus seems to have thus, or be returning, to the hair-trigger conditions that set off the global conflagration of World War I, and almost triggered thermonuclear war in 1962 and in the early 1980s.

The 1980s was a watershed in the nuclear age in many ways. For example, in the early 1980s, revelations about US planning with PD-59 and US talk about prevailing or winning nuclear wars, along with development of first strike weapons, such as the MX and Trident Missiles, and the deployment of the Pershing and Cruise missiles in Western Europe, led the Soviets to consider preempting a possible future US first-strike surprise attack by attacking first, and by adopting a launch on warning posture, moving closer and closer to a fully automated Doomsday Machine, with the development of the Russian Dead Hand. The Russians even went to the extent of developing a computer program to measure when the critical threshold might be reached regarding US superiority and Russian inferiority. When the strategic warning indicated that the threshold had been crossed, and the leadership was informed "that the security of the USSR could not be guaranteed...the USSR would launch a preemptive attack within a few weeks..." (PFIAB, 1990: 45).

An important source for this period is former CIA official Peter Vincent Pry's (1999) *War Scare: Russia and America on the Nuclear Brink*. Yet Pry's

argument is marred by the supposition that Soviet forces posed a greater threat to the US than the US did to the USSR, a reversal of actual realities, and an unwillingness to acknowledge that the US pursuit of strategic superiority has been a constant of the nuclear age, the US having never accepted the idea of parity. The impression that Pry gives here is consistent with the arguments of the infamous CIA Team B and related work of the Committee on the Present Danger, whose work helped drive forward the US strategic arms race, and whose members formed the basis for much of the Reagan administration. Yet as Soviet nuclear expert Pavel Podvig (2008) has shown, in fact Soviet forces neither had such a capability, nor were they oriented towards achieving a preemptive first strike capability in the 1970s, focusing instead primarily on retaliation, at least before the war scare of the early 1980s.ⁱⁱⁱ

Underscored here then is a question: did the US in fact always achieve strategic superiority, as argued here, and if so, what drove such US force postures and relate war plans? The answer to this, as Dan Ellsberg has argued most forcefully, is that US nuclear weapons have always served to back up US interventionary forces overseas through possible US first-use of nuclear weapons. And, so as to deter a Russian response to such use, or if such policies failed, for purposes of threat and leverage in crises, the US sought to be prepared to step up the ladder of escalation, including up to a preemptive first strike. Such policies of the manipulation of ambiguity, threats and the risk of catastrophe and resulting questions of decision-making under uncertainty in fact formed the basis for Daniel Ellsberg's Lowell Lectures, related articles and PhD thesis in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in a period of nuclear threats by Russia and the US, now being repeated in different forms today, what with back and forth threats between Russia's Putin and the US-led NATO alliance in the Ukraine in Europe and in the Middle East in Syria in ongoing regional conflicts today.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s Dan Ellsberg had uncovered this pattern of US threats of first-use of nuclear weapons and related pursuit of US strategic superiority and associated risks of nuclear war, as laid out in "A Call to Mutiny," and subsequently in 1984 and 1986, as a UC Regents Lecturer in a course, "Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy," and McArthur Proposal: "The Construction of Instability: US First-Use Threats and the Risks of Nuclear War." The publication of the PFIAB and related documentation shows the degree to which the hypotheses put forward by Ellsberg rightly underscored the much greater risks of nuclear war than most analysts supposed, even Ellsberg himself, and yet, the underestimation of them, and the durability of strategic stability at the same time.

Ellsberg's "Construction of Instability: US First-Use Threats and the Risks of Nuclear War," begins as follows:

For a dozen years I have pursued a trail of evidence that points toward a wholly new understanding of the role of nuclear weapons in American foreign policy and a new, and ominous, basis for calculating the risk of nuclear war. Emerging data, hitherto highly secret and little known even within the Executive branch, increasingly support the conclusion that every President since World War II, from Truman to Reagan (with the possible exception of Ford), has felt compelled in the context of an ongoing non-nuclear conflict or crisis to consider and prepare, or to threaten, imminent US initiation of nuclear warfare: US “first use” of nuclear weapons.

This secret history invalidates, or puts into question, much public and even expert discussion of US nuclear weapons programs, arms control policy, the US-Soviet arms competition and the risks of nuclear war, a great deal of which reflects the mistaken assumption that US nuclear weapons are designed and deployed only to deter or retaliate to Soviet nuclear attack. Even that discussion which recognizes a function of threatening or carrying out US first-use almost invariably supposes incorrectly that this is confined to the protection of NATO Europe, whereas most of the actual or threatened contemplated uses of US nuclear weapons have been in the Third World, in support of US or allied interventions outside Europe.

I will present the evidence for this hidden pattern of threats in both Europe and Third World crisis as a starting point for research exploring its implications for the strategic arms race and its risks; the nature and priorities of US foreign policy towards the Third World; the linkage in US strategy between strategic, theater, and tactical nuclear weapons and non-nuclear forces; the unstated aims in US arms control policy and the reasons for the “failure” of negotiations; and the prospects, under current policies, for nuclear first-use, escalation, or preemption.

Currently, little-understood policies, along with emerging new weapons systems on both sides that support them, seem to me to make the likelihood of nuclear war erupting out of crises and limited conflicts much greater than is commonly feared even by anti-nuclear activists, let alone by experts whose unawareness of these historical, political data has led them to a degree of complacency about the stability of the strategic environment.

This approach offers a coherent explanation of an otherwise-paradoxical, yet real and dangerous pattern: that nearly every strategic development on both sides in the last decade and programmed in the one to come reduces strategic stability, by increasing incentives to adopt, eventually, automatic launch-on-warning postures and even to preempt deliberately in major crisis. In the context of a requirement to enhance the credibility of US threats to initiate nuclear war and, if necessary, to escalate to a preemptive first strike—despite the emergence of strategic parity—these developments appear less random than deliberate and calculated, the “construction of instability.”

...The central hypothesis to be explored is that US policies on nuclear arms and arms control are designed, in part, to support the credibility of threats that the US will, if necessary, initiate nuclear war, essentially to protect US non-

nuclear interventionary forces from non-nuclear challenges to their operations in support of US interests overseas.

Theatre and strategic nuclear forces, according to this hypothesis, are designed to do this by enhancing the credibility of US threats to escalate nuclear war—possibility to the level of a strategic preemptive first strike—if US first-use of nuclear weapons should lead to Soviet retaliation in kind or Soviet escalation.

In an era of relative parity, it is further presumed, adequate credibility that a non-mad leader might carry out threats to escalate to a large-scale strategic attack depends on the plausibility of an incentive to preempt: which depends on a considerable mutual vulnerability to disarming attack and thus a mutual basis for fear that the other may preempt. Thus—in the absence of alternative bases for adequate credibility of threats to escalate to a first strike—a reliance on first-use threats to protect vital US interests abroad generates a willingness to tolerate, and even to construct, conditions of increased “instability.”

This relatively unfamiliar interpretation can “predict” and explain—demonstrably better, I believe, than any competing hypotheses...both past and current development and deployment programs in considerable detail, in terms of numbers and qualitative technological characteristics of weapons and basis, and the general nature of US arms control policy....

In particular, it can account for an otherwise paradoxical pattern: that programs on both sides appear flagrantly to flaunt the prescriptions for strategic “stability” that were first elaborated in the late ‘50’s and have been regarded as desiderate by consensus among analysts and officials ever since” (Ellsberg, 1986: 10).

Though this analysis stands as accurate in large part, the newly revealed heretofore secret nuclear crises of the early 1980s and subsequently reveal that strategic stability was and arguably still is even less robust than previously thought, as the programs and policies to increase the credibility of first-use and first strike threats, depending on a mutual incentive to preempt, greatly exacerbated the likelihood that one or more sides - in the 1980s, the Soviets - might launch a preemptive first-strike, in the context of fears that the US would strike first not simply in a crisis, but out of the blue. A recent landmark report this April 2015 from the Global Zero Commission on Nuclear Risk Reduction, *De-Alerting and Stabilizing the World’s Nuclear Force Postures*, brings this out in telling detail (see http://www.globalzero.org/files/global_zero_commission_on_nuclear_risk_reduction_report.pdf).

Central in understanding the realities of the risks of the nuclear age, to be investigated in *The Doomsday Machines*, though largely unknown to the public, are the requirements of Type II versus Type I deterrence. Type II or extended deterrence that has driven US nuclear policy seeks to extend the US nuclear umbrella to back up US interventionary forces overseas and US

allies, in contrast to Type I deterrence, which aims to deter a strike on the US (though most of the public think this is the primary if not sole determination of US nuclear posture).

In fact, the pursuit of strategic superiority that has always characterized US planning and weapons development, for reasons of backing up US interventionary forces overseas and US first-use threats, has continued even after the collapse of the Soviet empire and break-up of the Soviet Union itself, as the work of Keir A.1 Lieber and Daryl G. Press, above all, have emphasized, in a host of articles in *Foreign Affairs*, *International Security* and other prestigious journals.^{iv}

In a paper entitled "It Could All Come Back" in 1996, Ellsberg wrote:

It was like a miracle that the Cold War ended in the first half of the last decade... There has been no "post-mortem" (as the intelligence community calls its occasional efforts to discover the causes of an intelligence failure) to help us understand how such a global insanity developed in the first-place, so as better to prevent it from happening again.

We—the states, the publics, NGOs—are acting as if a Cold War, with a nuclear buildup, hair-trigger alert postures, imminent danger of global catastrophe, could never return, even in the long-run, or at least as if there were no short-run danger at all of moves in that direction.

The mood is like that Camus describes at the end of *The Plague*, when the outbreak of plague has subsided and most people are inclined to ignore the reality that the plague never really disappears entirely but waits its occasion for a return (when all the human behavior that aided its appearance or retarded an effective response to it can be reproduced,

Those words, presciently written in 1996, foreshadowed the return of that world which we are living in now; a new race to modernize US and Russian nuclear forces, related nuclear exercises, threats, and the possibility of military conflagration arising from regional crises and the continued hair-trigger alerts that keeps the possibility of nuclear war an ever present reality. The analytical framework developed here from some half a century of investigation and high-level personal experience in developing and studying nuclear war plans, and related efforts in analyzing both command and control and the related tensions between the requirements of Type I versus Type II deterrence, frame the many questions about the mysteries and secrets of the nuclear and thermonuclear age that will be dramatically answered in *The Doomsday Machines* (see Ellsberg, 1986: 10-11). To do this, however, will require some additional time to bring the analysis up to date with the recent literature on the Soviet American War Scare of the 1980s, and the renewed Cold War and concomitant war scares the world is

repeating again today, along with the new insights that reflecting on the recent past and dangerous present provides for understanding and responding to the risks, possibilities and challenges humanity faces necessary if we are to avert thermonuclear catastrophe today.

ⁱ President Carter, quoted in Michael Charlton, "Star Wars" or Peace-in the Skies (II): A Short History of Dreams and Nightmares (Section 4, "Jimmy Carter and the Retreat from "Assured Destruction"" *Encounter*, March 1984, p. 23 <https://www.unz.org/Pub/Encounter-1986mar-00013>

ⁱⁱ On the inertia towards preemption in the context of increasing strategic instability, see John Steinbruner, "Launch Under Attack," *Scientific American*, January 1984, Volume 250, Number 1, pp. 37-47.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Pavel Podvig, "The Window of Vulnerability That Wasn't: Soviet Military Buildup in the 1970s—A Research Note," *International Security*, Summer 2008, Volume 33, No. 1, pp. 118-138.

^{iv} See also John D. Steinbruner and William Kaufmann, "International Security Reconsidered," in Robert D. Reischauer, ed., *Setting National Priorities*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1997, pp. 155-196, especially p. 172, in which they emphasize the possibilities, like Lieber and Press, for the US to acquire a "very nearly...decisive disarming capability" against Russian and Chinese nuclear forces if Star Wars programs were added to existing US nuclear capabilities. See also John Steinbruner and Nancy Gallagher, "Prospects for Global Security," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, Summer 2004, p. 98, in which they noted that transformation, as currently being carried out by the US military "carries an appreciable risk of ultimate doom."